
TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE....

A Column on Consumer Issues

by Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem's
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Genealogy

Most people are interested in their family tree and actually tracing your family history gives you a sense of personal identity. But, most of us don't have the time or resources to do a complete job. Wouldn't it be wonderful if someone offered to do it for us?

A variety of companies sell mass-produced items for thousands of surnames. Millions of people buy these products hoping they will learn something about their own family histories. However, people with the same last name do not necessarily belong to the same family or share ancestors. Those who suggest that a mass-produced item is part of a consumer's individual family background are misrepresenting genealogy and family history.

The Internet can be an invaluable resource for genealogy research, but you need to exercise caution if you come across genealogy scammers. They are notorious for offering free information and before you realize it, you end up paying a substantial amount for what you can obtain for free by doing research on your own.

In August, an Iowa man was arrested and charged with 1st degree theft, identity theft, money laundering and ongoing criminal conduct for several genealogy scams he had hosted on the Web. His Web sites linked consumers to free Web sites. He not only tried to make money by charging for the free links, but also billed people's credit cards after not allowing them to cancel their free trial memberships.

Here are some tips for avoiding the genealogy scams:

- Be Alert!
 - Read the offer carefully; then think twice.
 - Was the letter sent to thousands of people with the same last name?
 - Does the letter offer a family history or just a list of names and addresses?
- Research It!
 - Check out a potential genealogy service thoroughly before signing up with it.
 - Do not give out any checking or credit card information before you know detailed information about the company.
- Return It If Possible!
 - Before you purchase information from a company you have not done business with before, find out if you can return the product if it does not meet your needs.
 - You should mail the product back "return receipt requested."

It takes research to trace your family tree. Be wary if someone insinuates they have done it for you. Just ask yourself, how could anyone possibly trace your family without contacting you first? Ask to see some sample pages of the book before you send any money. A legitimate company will do this for you.

The Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division investigates allegations of fraud in the marketplace. Investigators also mediate individual complaints against businesses. If you have a consumer problem or question, call the Consumer Protection Division at 328-3404, toll-free at 1-800-472-2600, or 1-800-366-6888 (w/TTY). This article and other consumer information is located on our website at www.ag.state.nd.us.

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